

What Lies Beneath

The Renovation and Underground Expansion of Our Temple on the Hill

By Marie Potoczny



Our capitol, ca. 1900, before the addition of its east and west wings.

Bipartisanship arguments aren't the only things shaking the walls of our Virginia State Capitol this winter. While the General Assembly debates proposed improvements to the Commonwealth, Richmond's historic Capitol building is undergoing changes of its own – an \$83 million renovation and expansion. The deadline is tight, scheduled to be completed by 2007 to correspond with the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown Settlement—the oldest, permanent, English-speaking settlement in the United States. “The Capitol has not been promoted as a tourist destination,” says Susan Pollard, Communications Director at the Virginia Department of General Services. “The changes are going to create a more peaceful visiting experience.” And just in time. Richmond expects a whopping one million tourists in 2007. Coinciding with the James-town anniversary, the new-and-improved Jefferson Capitol will be promoted as one of River City's main attractions. This requires more than just a quick paint job. For the next three years, visitors to Capitol Square will be welcomed with jackhammers

and upended earth. The \$83 million will cover the expenses of restoring the original Jefferson building, overhauling the exterior landscaping, and adding a 27,000 square foot expansion. But don't look to see a post-modern wing added to the Capitol facade; the new extension will be inserted underground to preserve the integrity of Jefferson's architectural vision, and to retain the stately presence of the Temple on the Hill.

Jefferson's Vision

In 1776, before the Capitol Building we know today was even a glint in anyone's eye, Jefferson was hatching a plan to relocate Virginia's capital city to Richmond, from Williamsburg. He believed Richmond was a better central location, would enhance trade, and was a safer from invading British forces. By 1780, Jefferson had developed an urban plan for Shockoe Hill – now known as Capitol Square – that included a prison, public

(continued on page 12)



A work in progress: Capitol Square in January of 2005.



POTOCZNY

A model of the Capitol as it should look by 2007. The visitor's entrance, visible in the bottom center, will lead to the new underground Capitol Extension.

market, courthouse, and several government buildings. At the time, however, the nation was at war, and had no money to fund such an undertaking; the plans seemed a pipe dream.

By 1785, however, after the state coffers fattened, Jefferson, just two months into his tenure as Ambassador to France, was asked to secure a plan for a new Capitol building of Virginia.

Jefferson strongly disliked the public buildings in Williamsburg, which he felt represented the old ways of British tyranny. The Capitol of Virginia, expressed Jefferson, should reflect democracy and the new civic rule he had been instrumental in creating. He looked toward the ancient Greeks and Romans for inspiration and greatly admired the Classical style of design with open porticos and freestanding columns.

Though he had not yet visited in person, Jefferson greatly admired the Maison Carée, a temple built in Nîmes, France by the Romans in the first century A.D. This building became the inspiration for Jefferson's Capitol design.

Jefferson's pared-down design did not include the grand urban planning of his earlier draft – he was forced to conjoin all

three legislative bodies into one building, rather than having separate locations for each. Together with Charles-Louis Clérissieu, a well-known French draftsman and expert on classical architecture, he created the “Temple on the Hill” visitors to Richmond know today.

Urban Geology

Over the last 216 years, the Capitol has gone through a myriad of changes, from paint jobs, to balcony collapses, to the addition of portico stairs. The last time the Capitol was seriously overhauled was in 1904-1906 when the east and west wings were added to house the Chamber of the Senate and the House of Delegates.

Today's renovations will try and match the splendor of the building after this addition. “If we tried to restore the building back to what it was like during Jefferson's time,” says Pollard, “it would be like saying those new wings never existed.”

The difficulty lies in knowing exactly what the building was like in 1906. Renovators have had to embark on a forensic journey to discover the secrets of the Capitol's past.

The walls in the rotunda, where the famous statue of George Washington stands, are pockmarked after being chiseled for

paint samples. As a geologist would study the stratified layers of rock on the earth's surface, scientists examine the layers of paint and decorative stenciling to determine the original color and interior intentions.

The contractor GBG Inc. has also taken core samples from portico columns, and key interior locations to determine the condition of the building. By using radar, metal detection, thermography, and ultrasound they have been able to assess the building's contents, and outline a plan for renovation.

Fusing Present and Past

The modern necessities of our century, however, far out-strip what the Capitol was originally intended to do. Though in 1875 it was considered one of the largest Capitol buildings in the nation, it is now one of the smallest. It still serves as a legislative building for the Governor and the General Assembly, but the meeting places are considered insufficient and the building is riddled with problems: crumbling paint, leaky pipes, inadequate restroom facilities, and poor handicap accessibility. After September 11, 2001, the need for tighter security increased as well.

“We used to go grab people who were hanging around the portico waiting for tours,” remembers Martha Snellings, Capitol tour guide. “Now all those doors have to remain locked. It's just not the same.”

To ensure the Capitol's future status as a tourist attraction, renovators had to find a way to meet contemporary needs while still keeping true to the historic building visitors come to see.

To meet this challenge, the Commonwealth called in historic renovation veterans Hillier Architecture, whose previous projects include completed renovations to the U.S. Supreme Court Building, Richmond's Old State Library, Frank Lloyd Wright properties, and more.

When Hillier saw that they couldn't go up or out, they went down, designing an underground extension beneath the South Lawn. The entrance to the Capitol will be moved to the Southwest corner of the Square at 10th and Bank Street, allowing visitors to approach the building from the front and view the Temple on the Hill as it was originally meant to be seen. They will then enter an underground archway, modeled after a Jefferson-era estate in Fluvanna County. The entrance was chosen to compliment the aesthetics of the Capitol, while not competing with it.

Upon entering, visitors will be greeted by a lobby and information desk. They can regroup before proceeding through the

security check. The new extension is designed specifically to accommodate large groups, which has proven problematic in the past. “It’s difficult when you have a hundred school kids coming through at once,” says Pollard. “It’s hard to maneuver effectively.”

With the new entrance, all public access to the building will go in and out of one place, and visitors will be screened far away

Did You Know...

- In 1861, the Virginia Capitol became the Capitol of the Confederacy. Recognizing the significance of the building for post-war Reconstruction, Abraham Lincoln sent Union troops to protect the Capitol from arson by the evacuating Confederate Army. Lincoln visited Richmond and the Capitol two days later, just before his assassination.
- 62 people died and 251 were injured on April 27, 1870 when the balcony of the crowded Court of Appeals collapsed onto the House of Delegates below. This day became known as the “Capitol Disaster.”
- Fossils dating over 450 million years old can be seen in the granite floors of the Capitol’s rotunda.
- Exterior photos won’t show you the Capitol’s biggest secret. The Capitol dome is ten feet under the “A-line” roof and one can only appreciate it by going inside. Better hurry, indoor public tours will not be given after February 2005 until the building is reopened in 2006/2007.
- Famous visitors to the Capitol include Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher.
- Was George Washington larger than life? See for yourself. Houdon’s statue is considered to be a perfect likeness of the Virginia-born President. To create such an accurate sculpture, Houdon made a plaster mask of Washington’s head. He poured plaster over his face and stuffed two turkey quills up his nose for him to breath.
- Meeting in the State Capitol in 1982, the General Assembly adopted milk as the official state beverage because of its nourishing qualities.

from the historic core of the Capitol before they proceed on to the tour.

Parking near the Capitol will also remain limited. “Keeping vehicles further away,” notes Pollard, “ensures better safety for everyone.”

After passing through security, visitors will proceed along the underground extension in stages that will include exhibition space, multi-purpose rooms, media facilities, snack and refreshment areas, and legislative workspace, before entering the Capitol building itself.

Of course, some of the planned changes will impact the oldest sections of the Capitol. “This is a public building and we have the obligation to take it one step further,” points out Pollard. One can’t help but think Jefferson, Father of Democracy, would agree.

“Not only are we going to be ADA-compliant, we are going to be more so,” she explains. Currently the only Capitol entrance for the disabled is on the West Entrance, past cobblestone and brick pathways. The elevator is so small, someone in a wheelchair has inches on either side of them, and no room to turn around in case of an emergency.

In addition, the Capitol is now equipped with only one women’s bathroom, and none of the restrooms are sufficient to

accommodate the public, particularly when the General Assembly is in session. The new renovations will solve this problem while modernizing facilities with resource-conserving motion-censored toilets and sinks.

So how do Richmond’s preservationists view these updates? “The Capitol is fantastic as a museum, landmark, and treasure,” says Jim Wooten, the Executive Director of the Capitol Square Preservation Council. “But the fact it is still being used as a public building, just as Jefferson intended. That’s really the best way to keep historic integrity.”

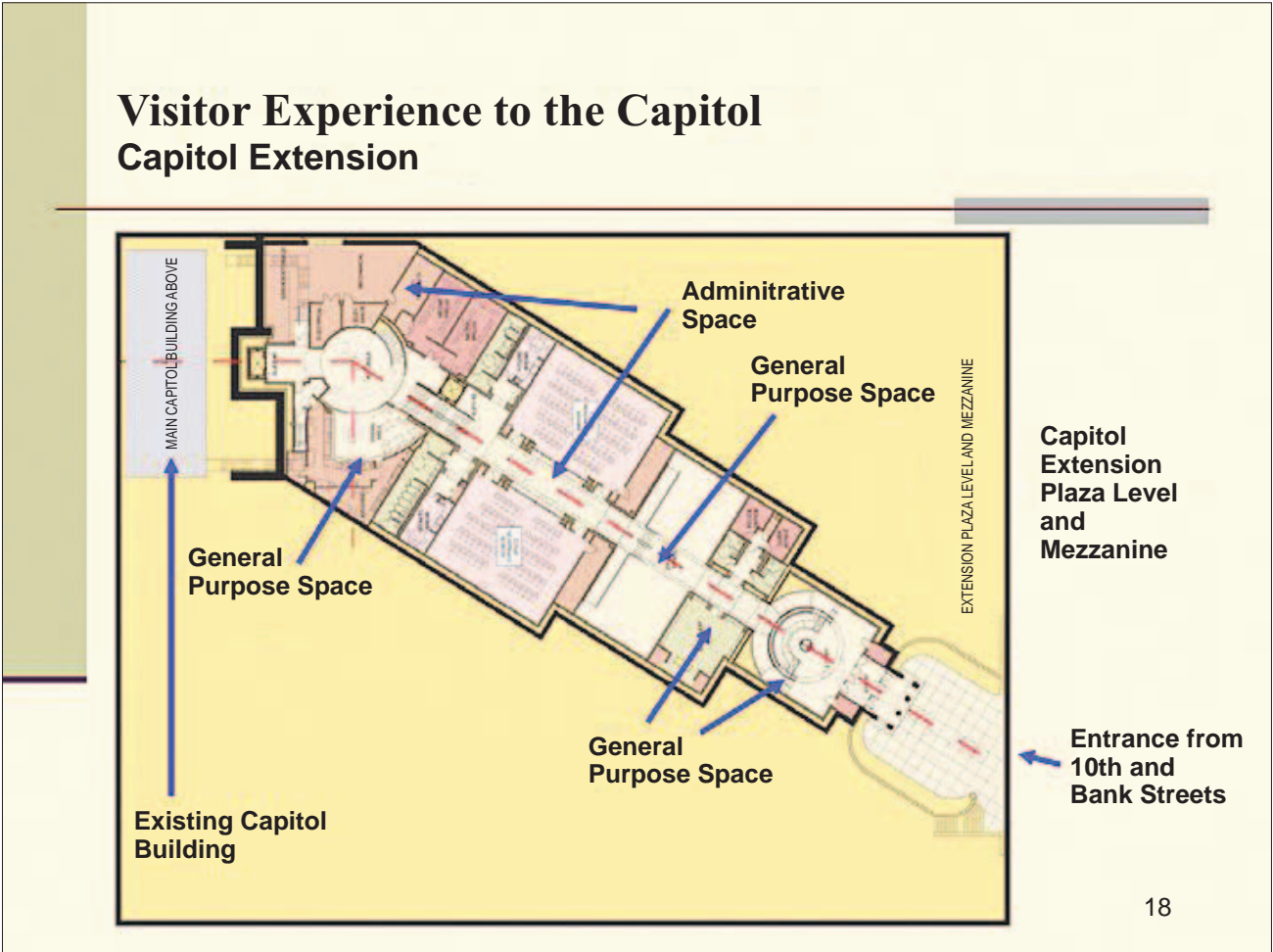
Jefferson may not have considered handicap accessibility or high-volume restroom use in his original design for the Capitol, but increasing public access to government is certainly an ideal of Democracy.

Yes, You Can Walk On the Grass

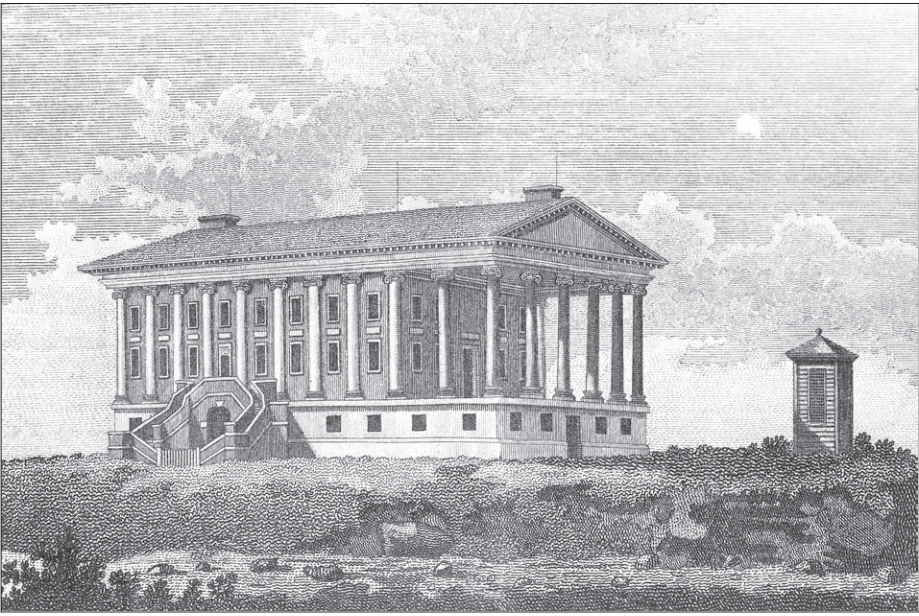
Of course, there have been victims to such invasive construction.

The Square itself is considered to be one of the nation’s oldest public parks and serves the public as a natural green space in the midst of downtown bustle. Before construction, noontime workers could be seen eating packed lunches on park benches

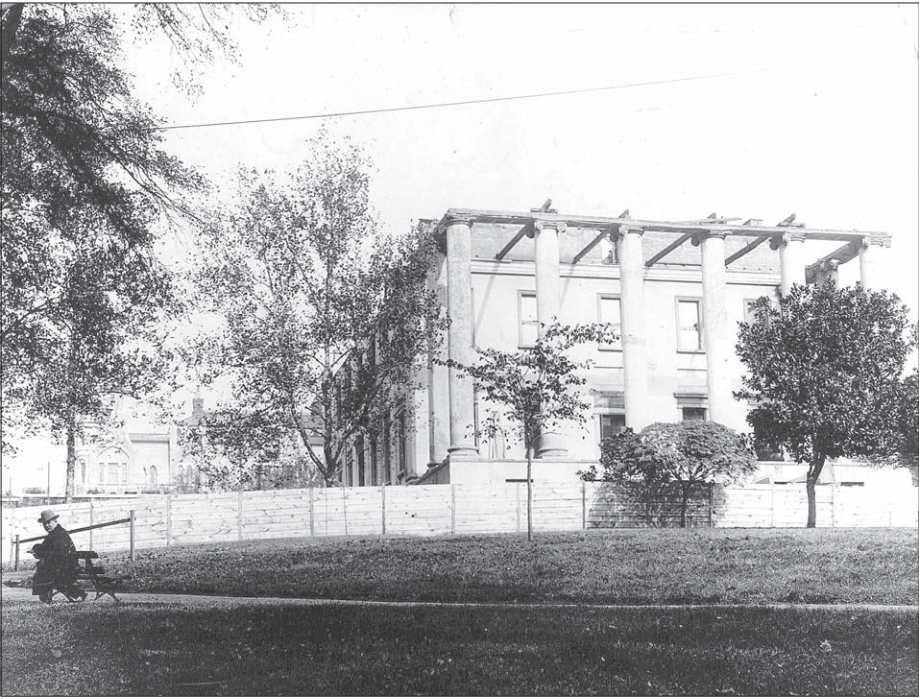
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This underground addition will provide much-needed space and modern facilities to the Capitol, without destroying the above-ground view of Jefferson’s Temple on the Hill.



Alone on the hill. The capitol in 1802...



...under construction in 1904...



...and as we've known it (ca. 1948).

and under the shade of trees. In the past, snow days brought children with sleds to whoosh down the slope of the Hill. Inaugurations, funerals, movie and television shoots have all taken place on the Capitol grounds.

To make room for the underground extension, nearly all of the Square's landscaping, including its oldest magnolias, dogwoods and oaks, had to be removed. The Alexandria-based architecture firm Rhodeside & Harwell Inc. won the contract to renovate the landscape. When construction is complete, the Capitol Square grounds will be restored to the historic splendor of the original Godefroy design, while honoring the 1853 makeover by John Notman (also known for landscaping Hollywood Cemetery in Oregon Hill).

To regain the dignity of the Capitol, on-site parking will be almost entirely eliminated. In addition, those trees still bordering the square will be replaced with a more "subtle" landscape design that allows pedestrians to view the building from the street.

The Next Ten Years

The General Assembly will relocate to the Old State Library this April, while their offices and workspace are under construction. "They will do something ceremonial at the Jefferson-designed building," says Pollard, "just to say they continued to meet there."

As for public access, beginning this March, the interior of the Capitol will be closed to the general public. Free tours will continue to be given, but will concentrate on the exterior grounds and statues. The Library of Virginia will exhibit selected sculpture and artwork from the Capitol as well.

"We might have temporary simulation trailers," says Snellings, who seems to be trying hard not to wrinkle her nose at the thought. Who can blame her? Despite its dilapidation and current inaccessibility, no trailer could ever replicate the sense of worship Jefferson had for his Temple to Democracy.

Fortunately, it will all be over soon enough. And once the Capitol is buffed and straightened, Susan Pollard sees the renovation investment paying off with increased tourism that will benefit the city over the next twenty-five years and beyond. Let's hope the simple and classical design Jefferson created continues to inspire Democracy over the next twenty-five years and beyond, too.

On That Note

- To keep abreast of changes to Capitol Square.
www.viriniacapitol.gov
- Learn about the Jamestown Settlement and what's happening in 2007 to commemorate it.
www.jamestown2007.org
- What did Jefferson have in mind when he designed the Virginia Capitol? Find out at the Library of Virginia website or visit in person at Library of Virginia. Parking is free.
www.lva.lib.va.us/whoweare/exhibits/capitol/index.htm
800 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23219-8000
Tel: (804) 692-3524 • Fax: (804) 225-2934
- Want to be an active participant in democracy and your government. Visit the General Assembly's webpage for citizen guides, classroom material, visitor information, legislation news, daily floor minutes, and more.
<http://legis.state.va.us>